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# TALK AND TALKERS

BY J. B. YEATS

I ONCE asked a great scholar of a famous University his idea of happiness. He answered: "A good read." But scholars are like the stars, lonely and inscrutable, and in God's holy keeping. I myself like best those rare moments when congenial people meet and there is good conversation, each man doing his best to say exactly what he thinks. Is there anything so delightful, and at times so beautiful, and at all times so beguiling, as good conversation? Talk is man's sowing-time, and as he sows, so shall he reap. Literature is the harvest of talk. If Elizabethan literature is the best in the world, it is because conversation at the Court of Elizabeth and in the London cafés was the best in the world. Elizabethan literature is nobly extravagant and musical, scarcely touched at all with the spirit of contention; and so, no doubt, was their talk. If Ben Jonson, who was a Scotchman, had had his way, no doubt, the conversation would have been as contentious as the speeches of lawyers or the sermons of theologians or the talk of a man out of Belfast. You can't read Shakespeare without feeling that he was shy of contention, disliking to contradict or be contradicted. Images to him were dear for their own sake, as one loves little children or pretty girls, without vexing ourselves as to whether they are good little children or good girls.

Conversation has as many enemies as Mother Church, and chief of these is card playing. I have been told that in Pittsburgh the ladies entertain distinguished 'strangers by inviting them to luncheon parties where there are no men. The husbands can get themselves up in immaculate evening clothes, but only to play cards, except when they talk business among themselves. Had the Athenians acquired the habit, it is very doubtful whether we should have had an Aeschylus or a Sophocles or an Aristotle. Another enemy is story-telling.

In any company, let there be one brilliant teller of good stories, and all the company become tellers of "good stories," and the wonderful thing is that no one listens, except long enough to know the nature of the story that is being presented, upon which each one searches in his memory for another story that may cap it. I have sometimes watched a company thus engaged, and it was easy to see that while apparently they listened politely and waited to applaud, their minds were far away, and the man telling the story knew it, and was depressed, and the sense of inattention grew with each talker, so that, though they applauded ever so much, everyone was increasingly bored. There is another enemy always lying in wait ready to pounce, and, like a mad dog, bite and infect the company with its madness. I mean the American passion for turning every kind of conversation into an impromptu argument. The French people perhaps have leanings that way. I have seen them with flashing eyes gesticulating and shouting at each other, and all their literature, in poetry as well as in prose, shows it, being pervaded with a logic of contention; but there is French ceremony, and above all, French politeness,—the spirit of Society, which regards as a crime everything that is tiresome. In American argumentativeness, there is not this restraint. I know all about it, for I have endured it many times. It is a debating society without a chairman and without rules. Sometimes you will see five men talking at once. It is not talk; it is not discussion; it is a mere riot of discord, and as unamiable as any riot in the street; and though the feeling lasts for but a moment, it must have an estranging effect; whereas real conversation brings people together in the holiday spirit of a common enjoyment.

Outside Belfast there is good conversation all over Ireland. Belfast itself is furiously Protestant, and Protestantism means the missionary spirit. Every man wants to convert his neighbor; your conduct, your morals, your opinions, are all fuel, to feed his controversial fire. He can't let you alone. In Belfast, conversation is always argument. They also have their taste for jocular and story-telling. I suppose it relieves the strain among these foolishly intense people. Indeed, more than once I've noticed in a contentious company one silent man aloof from

it all, and have been relieved and delighted when he produced his long meditated joke or pun, setting the table in a roar; even though I knew that after him would come the inevitable succession of bad jokes and stories, the roar of laughter, though it be false laughter, being better any day than the clamor of argument.

What is good conversation? When in love with a pretty girl, we find everything she says to be as exquisite as herself, and we don't care a straw whether we agree or disagree with her opinions. When we no longer love her, we are capable of thinking her tiresome or stupid if she is not as wise as Solomon. The chatter of a pretty girl in whom we are interested is as delightful as the song of the lark, even though, like the bird, she has no ideas; while there is nothing less attractive than the chatter of an ungainly woman. It has indeed sometimes happened that an ungainly woman who knows herself to be ungainly has cultivated wisdom and thereby kept her lover. In other words, talk with a pretty girl or with one of these wise Sibyls never becomes argument. Men argue sometimes with their wives, never with their sweethearts. English people do not argue. It is the habit of the nation not to argue. Although Protestants, they have somehow escaped the missionary spirit, saved, perhaps, by their incomparable spirit of personal independence. With them, an opinion is regarded as a personal property in which no man has any right to meddle. They do not converse much. It is a common sight to see a company of Englishmen sitting together, drinking, enjoying each other's society, and yet not talking; each man is immersed in his own thoughts. Yet, if they do meet for the purpose of conversation, they produce amongst them the best kind of conversation, and for this reason: that no one wants to argue.

For over twenty years, when I lived in London, I belonged to a Conversation Club, which had been founded by Moncure Conway and had taken, at his suggestion, the name of "The Calumets." Our club consisted of about a dozen members. We lived within easy reach, and met at each other's houses every other Sunday evening at nine o'clock. The talk was so interesting that we sometimes sat on till three or four o'clock. I do not remember that in all those twenty years, we ever had

an argument or the beginning of an argument. There was, I remember, one member who was a politician and a Right Honorable, a clever and successful man who would sometimes try to inject politics, which would have meant argument, yet no one ever disputed with him. We talked of other things and forgot him. I think he must have found us dull. You will ask what we talked about. Anything and Everything. We had Professors and Artists, Doctors and Writers and Russian Nihilists, and we often invited guests. Kropotkin was among them. We had one rule, which we never forgot: that no one should be a Calumet who had not an interesting mind. A man might believe that the moon was made of green cheese or that twice two were five, or that Bacon wrote Shakespeare; what matter, if he had an interesting mind? Socrates on one occasion said of himself that he did not argue, that his only object was to help a man to be safely delivered of his thoughts, and that it was an art derived from his Mother, who was a mid-wife. It is the mark of a well-educated Englishman, and to my mind of the educated man everywhere, that he follows this Socratic plan. If one of our members said something that we thought strange, did we feel hostility? No—we welcomed him; being one of us, he must have an interesting mind, and we would know his reasons. If his reasons seemed to us weak, we had such friendship for him that we would help him, being convinced that he was not a man to entertain a mental folly. Whether we hated or loved him, it entered into no man's thoughts to convert him. I lived for over thirty years in England. Until I was fourteen, I had lived in Ulster, besides constantly meeting with Ulster men, and nothing seems to me more pleasant to remember than the quiet mind of the Englishman, or less attractive than the contentiousness of the Ulster mind. There are no beliefs in Ulster, only opinions. In England are a few beliefs, deep as the well in which truth is said to hide herself; and as for opinions, they are only flurries of air that come from time to time to disturb a little the surface of the Englishman's far-extending mental tranquillity.

How well I remember those evenings with the Calumets! I wonder if the Society is still in existence, and whether they have the men, for it was not easy to get together twelve or thirteen

men with interesting minds who lived in a small district and within easy reach. Chief amongst these, an inspiration to the whole society, was York Powell, who succeeded Froude as Regius Professor of History at Oxford; and yet he was mostly a silent man, rather what Goethe praised: A talker who did not seem to talk; but then, he was that rarest and most social of all men, a listener—his presence amongst us cheered everyone with the thought that now had come an opportunity when each might do his best, for with such a listener, his energy would not of course be wasted. He was very much more than a listener. After his own fashion, he also talked. I used, however, to tell him that he talked telepathically, because as soon as he appeared, we all began to talk his ideas. Surely this was telepathy.

Good talk is the talk of an interesting mind, as good pictures are the pictures that come from an interesting mind. Art is good where the artist himself is interesting, if he have the technique and can evoke the music. Powell had the most interesting mind I ever knew.

There are other men, of whom I've known several, who are destructive critics. They come around you with their terrible logic, and all for your good,—or at least they think so,—and they are so skilled that for the moment you agree with them. These men leave you desolate. One of these was my friend Edwin Ellis, who was joined with my son in writing their book on Blake. Ellis, at eighteen, was as brilliant as if he'd been a society veteran of sixty. Never did I meet anyone with such alacrity of mental attention. While talking with you, he would think out into impeccable verse a whole page of Dante that had caught his fancy—but he was a destructive critic and the worst of the species. If you showed him a picture which was perhaps the pride of your studio, by some twist in his brain he would think it all wrong, and immediately set out to convince you.

Ellis was a prince amongst talkers, although his enthusiasm was for destruction; and the worst of it was that his enthusiasm was infectious, so that sometimes, with a passionate delight, a man subjected to it would destroy his most cherished poem or picture, like a lunatic burning down his own house. I have suffered, and have seen others suffer.

Another good talker was my friend and Ellis' friend, J. T. Nettleship. If there was a touch of the school-master in Ellis, as surely there is in all destructive critics, Nettleship had nothing of it. I could not conceive him under any circumstances giving an order to anyone. Had he been the commander of a regiment or a frigate, or a band of banditti, he would have led the way, like the born leader he was, but if the others did not follow, that would have been their business. He was a man of imagination all compact, yet essentially a man of action. Ellis and myself talked of theories and ideas and philosophy,—he of people and their doings and whether these were right. Demosthenes said that in eloquence the first thing was action, the second was action, the third was action: by which he meant that behind the orator, the audience must see the man, ready to carry out everything he says. Nettleship would say the wildest things, and we were dazzled because we knew that if the occasion arose, he would do them. He was an intrepid man, with arched eyebrows and calm eyes. We always felt that had not his pride kept him silent, he could have told us of many surprising adventures, several of which we indeed knew, his friends having told us. He had not much real education, although two of his brothers were distinguished University dons, and he had few ideas, but he had a passionate nature and intrepidity. It is a great advantage to be slow of speech, and Nettleship, though not exactly of slow speech, talked in broken sentences, with a watchful eye, stopping occasionally to find out whether any one was being bored, so that our attention was always on the alert. I think also that he had a nervous fear of being made ridiculous, though he was so intrepid. When I first made his acquaintance, he showed me a letter from D. G. Rossetti, in which was this sentence: "I know nothing in ancient or modern art so sublime as your design of God Creating Evil." Nettleship ought to have been a great artist, yet missed it by a wide interval.

People who waste their time in contradicting each other are intellectually frivolous, shallow, and a nuisance. They are empty-headed, and time lies heavy on their hands. My friends and I did not argue, because we had so much to tell. We left

theory to our betters, and yet as artists we maintained a detachment as genuine as though we were men of science.

Nettleship saw a great deal of Rossetti and his friends, and might have told us much, yet refrained. I think it was because he would not be thought a gossip. I learned from him, however, that Rossetti would never admit Swinburne to his circle unless Whistler came with him, since Whistler was the only one who could keep the poet from drinking. This view of Whistler as the solicitous guardian of a refractory poet does not convey the ordinary idea of him. Nettleship also sometimes saw Browning. I often asked him about the poet. But he never told me anything except that he could not conceive him without a clean shirt. I know he considered that Browning's having married an ugly woman was something that needed a great deal of explanation. Surely poets married to ugly women and faithful to their vows must content themselves ever after with the worship of moral beauty. Was it so with Browning? Was he ever in love? Was his feeling for his wife an intellectual friendship, which became afterwards an affection, but never the tender passion; and escaping the tender passion, did he not lose mightily? Was there ever so great a poet with so little poetical genius? Here and there is doubtless some music, but it is as if he pressed the keys with his left hand, and that a little maimed.

Let me say something of Irish conversation. First of all, we are a talking people, and have always talked, just as if we lived in polite society and had nothing else to do, or were French poets finding their best inspiration in French conversation; and though it be a strange thing to say, it may be that our best conversation is that of the unlettered peasants. They do talk well, and, as Synge has testified, have a poetical and many-colored vocabulary. A priest once told me that on his return from a long absence, the servant girl said to him that she was glad he was back; for, said she, "the color of loneliness was in the air." My daughters have a coöperative society employing about fifteen girls, who say that what they most enjoy are the long winter evenings when the men gather for talk beside the turf fire. Arthur Symonds spent some time in a poor man's cottage on the West Coast, and he said to my daughter that he did not believe the



village ever went to bed, spending all their time in talk. It was of these peasants that Oscar Wilde was thinking when he said to my son: "We are the best talkers since the Greeks." Synge stayed among them for many months, living in the same cottage, treated as one of themselves and speaking their language. And this man who was most fastidious, morally and intellectually, told me that he would rather stay with them than in the best hotel.

But we must not forget the conditions under which we now live. We all believe in progress, about which the Irish peasants don't care at all; and progress means commerce, for dullness is necessary to commerce. The Athenians in the time of Pericles spent all their time in going to see plays, in listening to orators, and in conversation, and had such interesting minds that they did not know that they were poor men living in cold houses. And is it not a fact that at the present moment the poorest kind of company are, as a rule, city people?

When I was a young artist living in London, I used on Sunday evenings to go to Madox Brown's house in Fitzroy Square, where would be a gathering of pleasant talkers. And one of these, Miss Blind, daughter of Karl Blind, told me that for a time these gatherings had been given up, and were in fact only just being revived, because, she said, city men had come and spoiled them so that the wits and the poets stayed away. And when I say that the Irish peasant has an interesting mind, I mean that he has a bright mentality functioning freely. Standish O'Grady, scholar, Irish historian, and man of insight, once said to me that no country in the world has such freedom of thought as Ireland. Nor do these people argue; unlettered as they are, all have the social instinct, and know that conversation is one of the arts, and that the end of art is intellectual pleasure—besides, they are reared on Catholicism, which is a poetical religion, as Protestantism is a logical one.

I take Synge and Stevens for my witnesses that Irish peasant conversation is wild and free, and sometimes as capricious and dangerous as the sea (out of which Synge's peasants got their living), or, for that matter, as wild and free as some of the dialogues of Plato.

I wish it were possible to build up a new Ireland on the basis of the peasant mind—enlarged, of course with knowledge and philosophy, yet keeping faithful to itself: to that self which is imaginative, and haunted by the wonderful and the fearsome and the magnificent and the beautiful. At any rate, it could be a civilization without ennui. According to old religious ideas, it is a folly to concern ourselves about this life, which is only a preparation for the judgment after death. We have changed all that, for now we look for a Paradise on this side of the grave. For that purpose let us cultivate the interesting mind, and let every man cultivate the kind of mind which is in harmony with itself; for that is something different from happiness, and it is independent of circumstance—a poor poet in a garret will have it, or a martyr in prison.

There is another kind of talker, who has no affinity with the dreamers and poets who sit beside the turf fire. He is very different, for he is sophisticated, and has a great deal of what is called education. By certain signs within myself, I know him when I meet him. If, talking with an Irishman, I feel myself at once irritated and fatigued and humiliated, then I know my enemy; and yet he is the politest of men. In fact, if he be of a true breed, he is a courtier and pays compliments. All the same, he is a weariness; and for many reasons. For all his pleasant looks, he doesn't listen, and he does not believe a word you say. Of course, he does not tell you openly that you're a liar and a bore. On the contrary, he will show you every mark of friendship, and indeed he is glad of your company, for he likes to feel rising up within him a certain mocking conversational antagonism, which is his chief pleasure in life. And because of that antagonism, he has a purpose in which he never slackens: to wound your self-love. Let anyone spend an evening with one of these perverse artists in conversation, and he will go away perhaps a wiser, but certainly a sadder man. If he is a painter, he will get the notion that he is only a duffer; if an eloquent speaker, that he is either a demagogue or a twaddler; if a poet, that his work won't endure. And this is his triumph: that he won't have said a word that is not, according to all appearance, a compliment, so that if you go away humiliated, no less are you

convinced that you have spent a pleasant evening with a most appreciative and indeed affectionate friend. And it is only after many such meetings that you learn that his company is sterilizing, and that you must shun him as a pestilence. It was Blake who made the distinction between the "confident friend" and the "political friend." He is to be found everywhere in Ireland, but mostly he comes from the South, though he makes Dublin and especially Trinity College his headquarters. It is a fact that while everyone respects Trinity College, it has not won anyone's affection. Is it because there are too many of these perverse men within its ancient walls?

In my time in college there was a very clever fellow of a County Cork family. Locke's *Essay on the Human Understanding* was one of the books in the curriculum, and when he came to that passage in which Locke says that if you ask the first man in the street whether two things could be in the same place at the same time he would say no, he at once hurried out of college and asked the first person he met, and was delighted when by some accident the man answered that it was possible. He was a good deal of a dandy, and one afternoon at a fashionable hour this well-dressed man flung himself down in the mud and pretended to have a fit, and when a crowd had gathered in a sort of amazed silence, he got up and gravely thanked them for their sympathy. Here is but another instance of that queer gratuitous antagonism that possesses this kind of mind, so that they want to see people humiliated and abashed. Is it because they have lost their own *armour propre* that they want to make everyone else seem small in her own eyes?

This kind of talker is clever and amusing and witty, but without philosophy and without creed, and if he pays compliments it is in the hope that you will repay him tenfold. And although he reads poetry and takes pleasure in the mechanism of verse, he is without poetry. Where his own pleasure or self-interest are concerned he is hard as nails. The type is not known in England or America. Why he should appear in Ireland I don't know. I may add that he is always a Protestant, a genteel, cynical Protestant. His lot is a sad one; he hates his Irish fellow-citizens because they are poor and the English because

they are rich, and he despises himself. Had he any sense of dignity, he might systematize his thoughts and become a thinker and proclaim himself a pessimist. He is like that undying worm in hell which is to gnaw away everyone's happiness.

The Ulster man has many opinions, but no power of belief. His so-called convictions are quite unreal, or, if I must call them convictions, there is in them no power of belief. That is why he is so passionate and furious and flamboyant in speech and action, so impressive to the stranger, and so little impressive to us who know him. In conversation he is an intellectual brute. Nevertheless, he fights fair, weapon against weapon, and the best man wins. And he listens well, because, like Cicero, he studies his adversary's case and is too good a sport and too much interested in the reality of the argument to belittle his opponent by berating him as a liar. He is doing his best, and wants you to do your best, and you find him so stimulating that you put forth all your strength; and when you separate, it is with mutual respect. You have probably wasted your time, but you are not downhearted.

And now let me add a caution. If the desire be for conversation, the room in which the talkers assemble must be well-lighted. Men will not talk and they cannot properly listen where they do not clearly see each others' faces, and this fact, true of all men, is especially so of the shy and diffident talker, unless his attention be fully occupied in watching the changing expression on the face of the man with whom he talks—he listens to his own voice, his voice comes back upon him, and he is embarrassed.

Why is it that modern ladies, especially in New York, like to show themselves in darkened drawing-rooms and at darkened dinner-tables, so that they seem as phantoms prettily appareled and no longer as real women? My old friend York Powell used to say that the only education proper to a woman was to know French and how to dance. The fact is that education is a good thing, but it is carried too far if the real woman—or for that matter the real man—is submerged in any kind of intellectualism. The grandmothers of these phantom ladies were women first and last. One of them might be only an old maid or a happy wife, or one unhappy, or, best of all, a pretty girl, filled with the poetry

of her own happiness, but she had a self, and out of that self she talked, when she did talk. She is no longer a self: she has become a student of this or that idealism imparted to her by some professor or lecturer, or by her college. She has become unreal, and her one idea is to shine like an ambitious young university undergraduate who has not yet acquired his sense of life. Is it wonderful, therefore, that she is content to be merely a decorative phantom at dinner parties or drawing-rooms? It was not so with the women of my youth. These women meant every word they said; and, that they might say it effectively, they desired that there should be plenty of lamplight (for in those days we had only lamps), shining upon all the faces in the company. I think that this suspension or abeyance of the self distinguishes American literature as well as the talk. Was Walt Whitman a real self? Was he not rather a great democratic bard and preacher? The charm of Shakespeare's sonnets is that they embody a real self—a most profound and complicated self, for which the world has never found the key; and in this respect, Keats comes nearest of all to Shakespeare. And why are Shelley's long poems so tedious? Is it not because in them his most radiant and exquisite self is submerged?

J. B. YEATS.